

# “RELIGION, MORALITY, AND PROPERTY”

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WEEK 6 — DAVID BOBB  DIRECTOR, THE ALLAN P. KIRBY, JR. CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL STUDIES AND CITIZENSHIP

**THE INSTITUTIONAL SEPARATION** of church and state—a revolutionary accomplishment of the American Founders—does not entail the separation of religion and politics. On the contrary, as the Northwest Ordinance states, “religion, morality and knowledge” are “necessary to good government.”

## LECTURE SUMMARY

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For America’s Founders, reason and revelation properly understood are complementary. “Almighty God hath created the mind free,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Human beings are fallible, yet despite this fact, they are capable of self-government.

With careful cultivation of one’s soul, attention to “the laws of nature and of nature’s God,” and the uplifting assistance of family, church, and the local community, an individual is able to tame base passions and live worthy of the blessings of liberty. Virtue is vital to good government.

Among the greatest of blessings—and the most important of rights—is religious liberty. Rejecting the low standard of mere “toleration” that existed elsewhere, the Founders enshrined liberty of conscience as a matter of right. It is immoral, they held, for any government to coerce religious belief. Yet they also argued that it is advisable for governments to recognize their reliance upon “Divine Providence,” and to provide for the support and encouragement of religion.

The government of the United States (or any of the fifty states) is not a church, and the church is not a governmental entity. This institutional separation, a clear statement of which is in the First Amendment, is a boon to both religion and politics, for instead of tying man’s religious fate to the future of the state, the establishment of religious liberty frees up religion so that it might flourish. This important point is missed by the Supreme Court’s misinterpretation, repeated numerous times since 1947, of Thomas Jefferson’s “wall of separation between church and state” metaphor.

## KEY PASSAGES FROM THE READINGS

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### FAST DAY PROCLAMATION OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

“Resolved, That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance and assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 119)

### VIRGINIA DECLARATION OF RIGHTS ~ George Mason

“That no free Government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 117)

### MEMORIAL AND REMONSTRANCE

#### AGAINST RELIGIOUS ASSESSMENTS ~ James Madison

“The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 129)

### VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ~ Thomas Jefferson

“Almighty God hath created the mind free.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 135)

### LETTER TO THE DANBURY BAPTIST ASSOCIATION ~ Thomas Jefferson

“I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’; thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 153)

### THE NORTHWEST ORDINANCE

“Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 125)

### LETTER TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION ~ George Washington

“It is no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoy the exercise of their inherent natural rights.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 137)

“[T]he United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pages 137-138)

“May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”  
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 138)

#### **FAREWELL ADDRESS** ~ George Washington

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 147)

“Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 288)

#### **ON PROPERTY** ~ James Madison

“That is not a just government, nor is property secure under it, where the property which a man has in his personal safety and personal liberty, is violated by arbitrary seizures of one class of citizens for the service of the rest.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 156)

“If the United States mean to obtain or deserve the full praise due to wise and just governments, they will equally respect the rights of property, and the property in rights.”  
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 157)

## STUDY QUESTIONS

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1. How does the Founders' affirmation of the fallibility of human beings lead to their conviction about the necessity of virtue?
2. What does the Northwest Ordinance identify as the primary means of encouraging virtue?
3. In the Virginia Declaration of Rights, what virtues are listed as necessary for self-government?
4. According to Jefferson, writing in the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, why is religious freedom necessary?
5. What does the “separation of church and state” mean?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is the difference between freedom of religion and toleration of religion?
2. How is there a “property” in one’s conscience? Why is this property the most valuable property to each person?
3. What role should the government play in the promotion of virtue?
4. How does Jefferson’s “wall” metaphor relate to federalism?



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